

## **Aperture**

I wake up every day and tell myself that my dad hates fags, even though I don't know if he does. I don't know if he hates fags, but I'll stand just outside the living room and I see how his eyes turn into slits as he listens to the latest gay rights news piece. I've been sitting cross legged on the floor, my back against his chair and his leg so close to my shoulder I can feel the heat, while all his homophobic friends are gathered around, yelling "fag" whenever some dumb jock on TV doesn't catch the ball or throw it or whatever it is they do to get paid a million a year. I see how his teeth clench and his hands tighten on the arm of the leather chair. He doesn't tell them to stop and I don't even think he likes being reminded fags are around.

I tell myself he hates fags and that they mean nothing to him and that one day when I'm long gone, he'll take all my old school photos and toss them in the fireplace one by one until I'm burned away and all gone because he'll hate me then too. Or maybe worse, he'll just put them away with the pictures of Mom he hid in the crawlspace. We'll be alone and stuck in that place forever or until he decides to get us out again.

I tell myself every day he hates fags, even though I don't know if he does, because I think he does. He's never said he hates fags, but he's never said he hates spiders, but I know he does because he catches them and throws them outside every chance he gets. My dad isn't a saying kind of guy. He's a doer.

I forgot to tell myself that this morning. I didn't tell myself he hates fags and I spent the day in school day dreaming, wondering so much that I almost smiled and that's no good.

So when I got home from school I did my homework at the kitchen table, called him at work, and I moved the ugly rug from over the trapdoor to the crawlspace so that I could lift the door and crawl down here. It's almost pure blackness, except for some light from the kitchen, and I lay on the ground, on the hard-packed dirt. Boxes are within an arm's reach and I see traces of Dad's writing on the sides, telling him what to hide.

It's cold and dirty down here. My eyes hurt from the dust and dirt and I'm holding tight to a good picture. My cheek is pressed to the dirt and the hinge of my glasses is cutting into my temple. I've got the picture in one hand and pressed against my chest so that I can feel my heart beating against my wrist.

I say it's a good picture because it's one of just my mom and me, none of my brothers are around to look at me out of the corner of their eyes with that look telling me *they* know and I should tell them or him.

How could they know? But I think they do know and I know Eddie knows because I told Eddie a long time ago and he let me cry and kept a tight hold of me until I finished.

Maybe when Dad's tossing my school pictures in the fireplace, I'll sneak down here and take a box of Mom's pictures and give them to Eddie before he moves onto them. Maybe he'd toss them in too, like he will mine and maybe our pictures can be burned together, all the ashes mixed up.

I need to stop thinking he hates fags because I don't know he does. My brothers don't. They all have gay friends and vote for all the right things for guys who probably suspect their little brother is a fag and they want to support him. Maybe Dad doesn't either. Hate fags, I mean.

I push myself up to my elbows and listen to the garage door going up. I shut the top of the box, catching a glimpse of their wedding picture, and shove it away just when I cram my good picture in my pocket. By the time I pull myself out, I hear the side door open and Dad walks in, hunching over to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe. The first thing he does is look for the bills I'd set on the counter.

"You're covered in dirt," he says, looking at the bills on the counter. That's all he says and he takes the stack of bills into the den. I follow him because what else is there? All my brothers are older and don't live here and maybe I'll get the guts to ask him while we're alone, which is stupid to think because we're always alone, just the two of us or just me until he gets home. He sits in his big recliner with his shoes and tie off and I perch on the arm of the sofa.

"Do you hate fags?" I say suddenly and I bite my lips hard, like I want to taste blood. He looks at me funny and puts a bill on his end table. "Don't say 'fags', Danny."

"Why?"

Another bill goes on his end table.

"Because it's a contemptible word."

I don't say anything and stare at him while he looks for his reading glasses on the table, not realizing they're sitting on his head.

He finds the glasses on his head and pulls them down, opening one of the bills and reading it. I can see the address line: Mr. Daniel W. Krouse III—

"Is there something else, Danny?"

"What about queer?" I ask.

I see his eyebrows go together and he gives me another funny look, but I see how his eyebrows look and his lips press together.

“They’re both contemptible words.”

“What about-”

“Daniel,” he says, gesturing for me to sit on the arm of his chair and I do, “all of those words are wrong.”

His hand is suddenly on my back, right in the middle, and he’s rubbing circles, like when I was a kid and I’d get sick and throw up all over the place or I’d start bawling because I hurt.

I swallow hard and look down. “OK.”

I look to see his face, to see if he’s still got furrowed brows and pursed lips, stretching his skin tightly over his cheekbones just right, like the time I stuffed a bunch of socks down the toilet because I hated wearing socks.

He doesn’t. His lips are curled a little upwards in a small smile and his eyes are closed and his skin is relaxed and I see how loose it is on him and how it’s turning into wrinkles around the corners of his eyes and mouth. His sideburns are almost completely gray now instead of jet black like the rest of his hair.

His eyes open and he looks straight at me and my synapses are misfiring somewhere because I can’t look away. My eyes are just like his. We both have hazel eyes and they’re not just one color. They’re amber and green and brown all mixed together, a picture perfect mix for hazel eyes. Mom always told me how our eyes were just alike and when we’d sit at the kitchen table together while we had lunch or breakfast, she would smile and stroke my cheek, telling me stories about her and Dad and my favorite was the story of when she spotted him across the lecture hall and she asked out the popular football jock because he had such beautiful eyes and he was so quiet and shy.

I’m the only one out of five sons who has hazel eyes and what does it even mean? Why should I be the only one? But Mom--she-- Mom loved them and she would whisper in my ear, telling me that I was so much more like him than any of my brothers.

And it’s true. Eddie moved out years ago and ever since then, there’s only quiet in every corner of the house. Quietness makes him hide pictures and makes me think he hates fags so much and makes me think that he would burn pictures of my mom just for giving him a fag son. Quiet is good, except when it’s like a poison gas creeping into the corners and you wake up one day choking on it.

I put my hand on my thigh, on the picture in my pocket, and his eyes twitch to my hand, resting on my thigh. I can’t look away and he smiles, but only just a little bit and he pats my cheek and I can’t tell if he’s being sincere or if he’s making fun of me somehow, like my still needing him is too cute because I’m in high school and the other brothers didn’t need him this long. He pats my cheek one more time and I feel my shoulders relax as his hand moves to rest on the crown of my head, his fingers resting lightly in my black hair.

“Dad--I--There’s a guy-” I start to say.

“You’re my son,” he says. “It’s not the same.”

He grunts as he pulls himself out of the chair. His fingers are pressed against my scalp and I can feel his fingernails. His hand moves as he stands so that just the tips of his fingers are still there.

“After we have supper we’ll go to the store and get you a nice frame for that picture,” he says very quietly and his fingertips are suddenly gone.